

ARAM

Periodical



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literacy in the Middle East.

In the history of civilisation in the Middle East, the achievements of ancient Mesopotamian and of Arabic culture are well known to everyone. The part played by Aramaic culture is far less familiar. Here my aim has been to look at one particular period in the history of one important representative of Aramaic culture. In the seventh century Syriac culture played a vital role in the transition between the ancient world, represented by both Mesopotamian and Graeco-Roman civilisation, and nascent Arab civilisation. But, as I hope will have become clear, the importance of Syriac culture does not lie solely in its role as transmitter of the Mesopotamian and Graeco-Roman heritages, for it also had its own creative contribution to make.

The Concept of Destiny in Islamic Astrology and its Impact on Medieval European Thought.

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Astrology is the art, or some would say, science, of attributing meaning to the transits of the stars and planets as they appear in the heavens. Its origins lie deep within the astral religion of ancient Mesopotamia of the third and second millennia B.C. From Mesopotamia astrology spread to the adjacent regions, changing its form as it went, adapting to Hinduism and Buddhism in India, Platonic and Aristotelian philosophy in classical Greece. In Christian Europe it assumed a pervasive influence on almost every activity and aspect of thought from its introduction in the eleventh and twelfth centuries until the intellectual revolution of the seventeenth. Even though many in Europe affected hostility towards the casters of horoscopes, in one form or another the assumptions of astrology were universally accepted. Planetary influence on weather and human disease, for example, was acknowledged without question.

In spite of its superficial ability to adapt to its host culture, European astrology was never entirely shorn of its pagan religious connotations, and friction between the celestial science and Christian orthodoxy ebbed and flowed, depending on changing intellectual fashions, but never entirely disappeared. Twelfth and thirteenth century theologians such as Thomas Aquinas and Albertus Magnus were obliged to devote considerable effort towards justifying its existence in Christian culture and explaining their interest in it. Indeed, in the fifteenth century, under the impact of Renaissance Hermeticism and Neoplatonism, astrology's pagan overtones became a positive attraction. In its fundamentals, the practice of astrology in Europe until the seventeenth century, and its survival in a more limited form until the present day, therefore represents the continuance, albeit in a disguised form, of Mesopotamian astral religion.

Unfortunately the poor reputation of astrology amongst western scholars over the last three hundred years has resulted in a number of negative consequences as far as the study of its history is concerned. The subject

1. The effect of modern prejudice on the study of the history of astrology has been raised by Patrick Curry in *Astrology, Science and Society* (Woodbridge, 1987) pp. 1-4. The possible reasons are discussed by Halbronn, *The Revealing Process of Translation and Criticism in the History of Astrology*, in Curry, ed., op. cit. pp. 213-215.

has perhaps not been given the attention that it deserves¹. In addition modern views on the nature of astrology are imposed on to the past. For example, it is commonly held that astrology is fatalistic in relation to modern western notions of individual freedom, assuming that human life follows a preordained pattern, inducing in the believer a state of passive acceptance of external events². It is held that the same characteristics applied to medieval astrology. This assumption is now open to question.

The role of astrology in the Islamic world has also been largely ignored by western scholars, an oversight which is surprising in view of European astrology's direct descent from Islamic sources. Astrology virtually disappeared from western Europe in the fifth century under the combined impact of the Germanic invasions and the hostility of Christianity to anything which smacked of paganism. It was the Islamic world, therefore, which was responsible for transmitting the legacy of Babylonian astral religion to medieval Europe. Eighth, ninth and tenth century astrologers such as Alberuni (al-Biruni), Albumazar (Abu Ma'shar), Alfraganus (al-Ferghani) and Messahala (Masha'allah) assumed an unquestioned authority amongst medieval Christian astrologers. As late as 1649 William Lilly's *Christian Astrology*, the first and major opus on astrology in the English language, cited works by Albumazar, Alfraganus, Albubater, Alkindus, Alcabitus, Albohali, Albategnius and Messahala, all available in Latin translations dated from 1272 to 1613³.

The traditional date of the foundation of Islamic astrology is 770 A.D., in which year the Indian astronomical—astrological treatise, the *Sindhind*, arrived in Baghdad. A number of the major figures, such as Masha'allah, al-Kindi and this pupil Abu Ma'shar, belonged to his period and it seems clear that the major work concerning the study of revolutions or conjunctions, that is the application of astrology to the study of history, was accomplished at this time. The impact of the theories of astrological influence on history proposed by Abu Mashar and Masha'allah on the evolution of European notions of historical periodisation has yet to be fully evaluated but may be considerable⁴.

The most enduring astrological text book, al-Biruni's *Elements of the Art of Astrology*, which included detailed rules for the interpretation of natives, horoscopes cast for the time of birth, was published at Ghaznah in 1029.

The 'golden age' of Islamic astrology, as of Islamic science in general, occupied the tenth and eleventh centuries, a phenomenon which Nasr has attributed to the relative power of Shi'ite princes in those centuries and the tolerance of Shi'ism to pre-Islamic belief systems particularly Hermeticism and Pythagoreanism, philosophies which themselves frequently offered a sympathetic home to astrology.

The transmission of Islamic astrology to western Europe seems to have been coincident with this golden age. Lynn Thorndyke has shown how the translations of Islamic astrological texts by Christian scholars may have been underway by the late tenth century, considerably earlier than the twelfth century which was once thought to be the peak period of translation⁵. True, Claudius Ptolemy's classic work, the *Tetrabiblos*, was not translated until 1138, yet this event marked the culmination rather than the birth of the process⁶. That the translation of astrological material occurred at the beginning of the period of translation of Arabic texts into Latin has caused a reassessment of the process by which Islamic astrology penetrated Christian thought. The convention amongst most nineteenth and twentieth century historians has been that the process of translation represented a quest by western scholars for the true learning of the ancient classical world, principally science and philosophy, and that astrology was an unfortunate superstition which acquired as part and parcel of the intellectual baggage inherited from the Islamic world. However, if astrological texts were amongst the first to be searched out and translated this suggests that western scholars were equally interested in astrology as in Aristotelian philosophy or classical science. Indeed, they may have been more interested in astrology than in astronomy or mathematics.

see E. S. Kennedy and David Pingree, *The Astrological History of Masha'allah*, (Cambridge, Mass., 1971).

5. Thorndyke pointed to Gerbert d'Auvergne's explicit request in 984 that Lupinus of Barcelona send him a book on astrology which he had translated as a sign of active Christian interest in Islamic astrology. See *A History of Magic and Experimental Science*, Vol. 1, chapter XXX, p.698.

6. The *Tetrabiblos* was written in Alexandria in the mid-second century and 'enjoyed the authority of a bible among the astrological writers of a thousand years or more'. In fact, its authority was accepted without question until the mid-seventeenth century. The work was translated from Greek into Arabic by Ishag ben Hunain in the ninth century and from Arabic into Latin by Plato of Tivoli in 1138. See Claudius Ptolemy, *Tetrabiblos*, trans. F. E. Robbins, (London, 1930), pp. viii, xii, xiv.

2. Commenting on Islamic astrology, Nasr writes of the 'helplessness and passivity of earthly creatures before the angels, or divine agents, who are symbolised by the planets'. See *Islamic Cosmological Doctrines*, p.82. Eugenio Garin describes Renaissance European astrology as characterised by a 'consistent naturalism and rigid determinism'. See *Astrology in the Renaissance: The Zodiac of Life*, (London, 1983), p.16. In fact, only the Stoics believed in preordained fate. All other schools of astrology allowed for human intervention in the astrological process.

3. See William Lilly, *Christian Astrology*, (London, 1647), facsimile edition 1985.

4. For Abu Ma'shar see the *Thousands of Abu Ma'shar*, (London, 1968). For Masha'allah

Certainly, such a proposition is not difficult to substantiate. Astrology, after all, was a supremely practical branch of knowledge. It provided insights into human biology and psychology, politics, economics, meteorology and virtually every aspect of existence on earth, supplying to the believer a completely satisfying unified theory of knowledge. More than this, it offered scientific means of predicting the future by the simple means of anticipating projected astronomical cycles and interpreting these in accordance with rules which were to be found in any text book. European scholars would have been aware of astrology before even the first Arabic translations, a number of works having survived in Latin manuscript since the fifth century.⁷ It is likely then, that an interest in astrology was fuelled by various extant texts which, though largely ignored since the collapse of Roman power, by the tenth century were sufficient to encourage European scholars to discover more about this mysterious subject, claiming as it did to hold the ultimate key to knowledge.

Astrology held out to politicians and ambitious clerics the possibility that the future might be predicted and advantage gained over one's rivals. Already in the ninth and tenth centuries it is said to have been the fashion amongst Frankish nobles to acquire the services of a personal astrologer, even though contemporary knowledge of the subject was crude in relation to the subtleties and complexities of the Islamic art.⁸ In the twelfth and thirteenth centuries a number of the greatest translators were employed in precisely this role. Adelard of Bath seems to have cast horoscopes for the future king Henry II of England while Michael Scot secured a position at the court of the Hohenstaufen Emperor Frederick II.⁹

The nature of medieval European interest in Islamic astrology raises vital questions concerning astrology's attitudes to fate and human free will. It is though, the applications to which astrology was put which

explicitly defy the common assumption that astrology and fatalism walked hand in hand. What, we must ask, was the point of forecasting the future unless there was some possibility of changing or amending the predicted events? Indeed, a large part of European astrology was devoted to the adjustment of the future via the principles of natural or ritual magic. The use of charms, talismans and prayer, the administration of herbs or the implementation of changes in lifestyle were all acknowledged means of amending one's destiny. The bulk of such methods involved the manipulation of the web of symbolic relationships between all natural and supernatural phenomena which were held responsible for the regulation of those phenomena. If this failed, direct appeal might be made to God. Such an attitude closely mirrored that found in early Babylonian astrology in which it was considered essential to offer thanks to, or placate, astral divinities depending on the nature of the relevant forecast. To the Babylonian or Assyrian priest an astrological prediction frequently required human intervention in the form of a religious ritual designed to enhance or mitigate its effects.

Did then, European scholars see in Islamic astrology a means of achieving greater human control over the natural world, of asserting individual freedom in the face of Destiny? In order to fully understand Islamic and medieval European attitudes to astrology it is necessary to look beyond the apparently fatalistic predictions dispensed by astrologers and place their work in the context of the Hermetic, Neoplatonic and Neo-Pythagorean teachings which pervaded esoteric circles in Islam from the eighth century onwards, and in western Europe from the tenth and eleventh centuries.¹⁰

Particularly influential in the Corpus Hermeticum, the foundation of Hermetic teaching, was the myth of Er. In this passage Plato described the subjugation of the original free soul to the demands of necessity as a consequence of physical incarnation. According to his account the stars and planets revolved on the spindle of necessity, and the soul, which prior to incarnation had taken a free choice concerning the circumstances of life and external events, but not the personality, was incarnated via the planetary spheres into a world governed by Necessity.¹¹ Necessity and, by implication the personality, was therefore regulated by the planetary spheres. In this dire situation Reason, the quality of the soul, was

7. Marcus Manilius' first century astrological poem, *Astronomica*, appeared in a tenth century library catalogue from Bobbio, and Gerbert was aware of its existence in 983. See Manilius, *Astronomica*, trans. G.P. Goold, (London, 1977), p. cvi. A manuscript of Julius Firmicus Maternus' *Mathesis*, a complete guide to astrological interpretation written around 334 A.D., may have been recorded at Regensburg library in the ninth century. See *The Mathesis of Firmicus Maternus*, trans. Jean Rhys Bran, (New Jersey, 1975), p. 6.

8. Thorndike, op. cit., Vol. I, BkII, chap. XXIX, p. 673. Alcuin, who in 770, set up Charlemagne's cathedral school at Aachen, was said to be a skilled astrologer, although his range of knowledge was probably severely limited and restricted to vague ideas of planetary influence. See Einhard, *Life of Charlemagne*, trans. Lewis Thorpe, (London, 1969), p. 79.

9. For Adelard see J.D. North, *Horoscopes and History*, (London, 1986). For Michael Scot see Lynn Thorndike, *Michael Scot*, (London, 1965).

10. For the philosophical teachings of Hermes Trismegistus, compiled in Alexandria in the first and second centuries B.C., see *Hermetica*, ed. and trans. Walter Scott, 4 Vols, (Boulder Colorado, 1982).

11. Plato, *Republic*, trans. H.D.P. Lee, (London, 1955), Book 7, 529-30.

largely smothered by the passions engendered in the realm of Necessity. Throughout the Hermetic teachings life is portrayed as a battle between Reason and Necessity, with the latter invariably holding the upper hand. The initiate was required to strive to develop the attributes of Reason in order to attain liberation from the chains of Necessity.

Such an attitude often resulted in hostility to astrology, for the planets were portrayed as the gaolers who imprisoned the originally free and pure soul in this terrible world. To study astrology was therefore to accord undue reverence to celestial bodies which were rather to be objects of resentment or hatred. Yet the same doctrine could equally be used to justify faith in astrology, for were not the planetary spheres the path by which the initiate might return to the realm of Reason, whether conceived as heaven, or the Platonic world of Being, lay beyond the planetary spheres. In medieval art the seeker of enlightenment is frequently shown ascending a ladder to heaven via the planets. This, at least, was the rationale behind Mithraic religion. There were other contradictions. It was, for example, common amongst Platonic philosophers to deride predictive astrology on the grounds that it claimed to derive absolute knowledge from the study of the physical motions of the planets, an activity contrary to both the letter and the spirit of Platonic philosophy: the most devastating attack on astrology in the ancient world was launched by Carneades, head of the Academy in the third century B.C. Yet Platonic cosmology, reinforced by later Stoic accretions, provided the fertile intellectual climate in which astrology spread throughout the Roman world.

Such contradictory attitudes to astrology, a consequence of the internal contradictions in Platonic, Aristotelian and hermetic teachings as well as of the differences between them, were replicated in the Islamic world. Schools such as the Ikhwan al-Safa and philosophers such as Ibn Sina repeated the classic Platonic position as outlined by Carneades by rejecting predictive judicial astrology while adhering to Neoplatonic and Hermetic cosmology with all its overtones of both spiritual and physical planetary influence. However, the fact that such people saw the practice of judicial astrology as a denial of freedom did not prevent others, influenced by the same esoteric background, from becoming devotees of the predictive art.

Seen against the background of Hermetic teaching, astrology starts with an understanding that people devoid of Reason are governed by Necessity and therefore subject to Fate. For these people astrological predictions may indeed be immutable.¹² As a highly mathematical art

12. «Those men are devoid of mind and are merely led along in the train of Destiny». *Hermetica*

astrology subscribed to the Pythagorean notion of a universe regulated by number and revealed in celestial motions. By analysing and living in harmony with these motions the astrologer achieved a freedom based on the recognition and understanding of Necessity, a philosophical position derived from Stoic teachings in which individual perception of an external event was of more importance than its nature. Yet it was also part of the Islamic astrologer's task to amend external events. As we have seen in the case of his European successor, by providing talismans, prescribing medical treatment or offering a range of advice, the Islamic astrologer initiated a dialogue with destiny, the goal of which was to mitigate the demands of Necessity. Hence the close ties between astrology and the treatment of the sick, the direct application of cosmological knowledge to the prevention or postponement of death. Destiny, to the astrologer schooled in hermetic thought, was negotiable. In this process what Ibn Sina called talismat (drawing celestial forces upon terrestrial ones) was an essential accoutrement of nujun (judicial astrology). Talismat offered the practical solution once nujun had enabled a forecast to be made. The philosophical quest of the Ikhwan al-Safa was of a different order yet no less devoted to the principle of astrology as a route to the perception of the Truth.

In this context then, we may acknowledge the function of an astrological text such as al-Biruni's *Element of the Arts of Astrology* as something more than a manual for astrological prediction, of use to those whose attitude to life was passive and fatalistic. Rather it offered a code to be deciphered by those who were willing to begin the path of personal liberation from the chains of Necessity. Al-Biruni was a devout Muslim who had absorbed Hindu, Hermetic and other influences while remaining true to the mainstream of his faith. Astrology, in his world, offered a path to the understanding of God no less valid than of any other science.

Seyyed Nasr has defined those characteristics of Islam which allowed it to offer such a ready home to pre-Islamic beliefs and sciences, including astrology.¹³ Its acknowledgment that God's Truth might be revealed through different faiths permitted the ready incorporation of Hermetic, Neoplatonic and neo-Pythagorean teachings. A recognition that human reason might enhance rather than, as in Christianity, deny perception of Divine Truth, assisted in Islamic appreciation of classical philosophy, including those schools which explicitly or implicitly supported astrology.

Fragment 19, Scott op.cit., p.539.

13. See Nasr op.cit., pp.1-18.

Lastly, an appreciation of natural phenomena as 'signs of God' to be contemplated by the believers' encouraged the study of the natural environment. Once this realm was extended to the celestial spheres astrology too became a means revealing God's presence. This belief in the power of nature to reveal the Divine was adopted and repeated by European astrologers as late as the seventeenth century. Nicholas Culpepper, the English astrologer who is still celebrated for his work as a herbalist, advocated the study of two great books, the book of the Scriptures, or the Bible, and the book of the Creatures, or Zodiac¹⁴. According to Culpepper, and here we see an exact repeat of Babylonian tradition, the passage of the planets through the Zodiac was the writing of god, there to be interpreted by anybody versed in astrological principles. Culpepper also made it clear that the Book of the Creatures encompassed the entire natural world.

In such a perspective God's truth might be revealed through the opening and closing of a flower as through the study of astrology or the sacred scriptures. Thus the Renaissance view of astrology as a path to personal enlightenment was firmly rooted in the Islamic conception of nature¹⁵.

The question remains as to why Islamic astrology exercised such a fascination for medieval European scholars? For philosophers and theologians it offered something which Islam possessed but eleventh and twelfth century Christianity lacked, the prospect of a reasonable and rational route to comprehending God's creation. In addition it held out the seductive prospect of control over a natural world which was otherwise chaotic and threatening. These twin facts of Islamic astrology were, then, a principle motivation behind the great quest by western scholars for Islamic knowledge from the tenth to twelfth centuries, a quest whose consequences were to transform European thought.

14. Nicholas Culpepper, *Catastrophe Magnarum*, (London, 1652).

15. *The Rasa'il of the Ikhwan al-Safa*, probably compiled in the tenth century, ascribed all knowledge to four groups of books. The third of these, the *Books of Nature*, consisted of the ideas in the Platonic sense of the forms of creatures actually existing. From the composition of the celestial spheres, the domain of the Zodiac, the movement of the stars, and so on... to the transformation of the mineral, plant and animal kingdoms and the rich variety of human industry'. *Rasa'il IV*, 106, cited in Nasr, op.cit., p.39. Culpepper's *Book of the Creatures* was clearly identical with the *Ikhwan al-Safa's Books of Nature*.

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